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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TAIPEI 003182

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SUBJECT: GROWING TAIWAN IDENTITY AFFECTS DOMESTIC POLITICS  
AND CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

REF: TAIPEI 2118

Classified By: AIT Director Douglas H. Paal, Reason 1.4 b

1. (C) Summary. The growing "Taiwanese" identity has important implications for cross-strait relations and for the future of Taiwan's political system. Over the past fifteen years, the number of people identifying themselves as Taiwanese has nearly tripled to around 45 percent, while those who consider themselves "Chinese" has plummeted to around 6 percent. This emerging Taiwanese identity has affected domestic politics, notably enabling the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to rally support as the Taiwanese party and elect Chen Shui-bian as its first President in 2000, and re-elect him in 2004 with a much higher vote. The growing Taiwanese identity has not, however, translated into greater support for independence; on the contrary, support for the status quo has remained consistently high. While the people of Taiwan increasingly recognize they are different from the people of Mainland China and articulate this by proclaiming they are "Taiwanese," this identity does not trump more practical considerations, including quality of life issues, Taiwan's increasingly close economic ties with China, and the threat of a cross-strait war. End Summary.

#### Identity Transformed

2. (C) The shift in identity among the people of Taiwan over the past fifteen years has created an identity increasingly separate and distinct from Mainland China. A series of Chengchi University polls over the past thirteen years shows that the proportion of people in Taiwan who identify themselves as Taiwanese, or Taiwanese, rose steadily from 17 percent in 1992 to over 44 percent in 2004, mirroring in reverse the decline in those who consider themselves "zhongguoren," or Chinese (26 to 6 percent). (Comment: Since the term "zhongguoren" for "Chinese" stresses more directly identity with the country of China it is likely to receive a stronger negative reaction in Taiwan. It is likely that a question about Chinese identity using the alternate term for Chinese, "zhonghuaren," would have elicited a more positive response since that term stresses more cultural identity. End comment.)

3. (C) The proportion considering themselves both Taiwanese and Chinese has remained nearly constant at around 45 percent. These findings were corroborated by a TVBS poll in September 2004 that found 45 percent of respondents considered themselves Taiwanese compared to 41 percent both Chinese and Taiwanese and 9 percent as Chinese. This identity shift has been reflected in the Taiwan political system. DPP President Chen Shui-bian won just over 50 percent of the vote in 2004, a substantial increase over the 30 percent he received in the 2000 presidential election. Dark Green Professor Chen Yi-shen of the Academia Sinica told AIT that this increase was a product of the growing proportion of Taiwan people developing a Taiwanese identity and, in turn, identifying with the DPP.

#### Interaction, Education, Hostility Fuel Changing Identity

4. (C) While the evolving Taiwanese identity is in part a natural product of the island's century-long separation from Mainland China, other forces have been at work encouraging this identity shift. First, Taiwan's democratization itself has been one of the drivers behind the growing Taiwanese identity. The lifting of martial law in 1987, according to Academia Sinica's pro-Green Prof. Hsu Yung-Ming, gave the people of Taiwan freedom to think and speak, and allowed the newly created DPP leeway to promote its notion of a unique Taiwanese identity. Prof. Chen Yi-Shen told AIT that the people of Taiwan are aware of the sharp contrast between Taiwan's democratic political system and Mainland China's autocratic government. In Taiwan, he explained, democracy and the nation-state have become connected, and the people of Taiwan see stark differences between the systems of Taiwan and Mainland China and increasingly differentiate themselves from China. The growing contact and interaction between Taiwan and Mainland China has reinforced this sense of difference and encouraged the people of Taiwan to develop their own separate identity. Once Taiwan people were able

to travel to China after Martial law was lifted, Hsu continued, they realized how differently China and Taiwan had developed )- economically, culturally, and even everyday mannerisms and customs -- to the extent that many people in Taiwan now hold very negative views of Mainland Chinese, often viewing them as backwards, crude, and ill-mannered. In turn, people in Taiwan increasingly identify themselves as "Taiwanese" in part to separate themselves from Mainland Chinese. National Taiwan University's pro-Blue Prof. Lin Huo-Wang argued that as long as Mainland China remains an autocratic state, Taiwan identity will continue to develop.

15. (C) Second, after the DPP came to power in 2000, Taiwan-centered education began to replace the China-centered education of the Kuomintang era. The prohibition on speaking Taiwanese dialect in schools, for example, was reversed and elementary school students were required to study a native language an hour each week. Public opinion polling experts have told AIT that their survey cross tabulations indicate younger people view Mainland China significantly more negatively than do older people. TVBS Poll Chief Wang Yeh-ding, for example, pulled out an April 2005 poll that showed a stable 19-20 percent of all age groups viewed Lien Chan's trip to Mainland China as a "sell-out," with the exception of the 20-29 year age bracket in which 34 percent held this view.

16. (C) A third reason the people of Taiwan increasingly identify with Taiwan as distinct from Mainland China has been Beijing's hostile actions towards Taiwan. The PRC's heavy-handed attempts in 1996 and 2000 to influence Taiwan's presidential elections with missiles and threats, according to Prof. Hsu, shocked and angered the people of Taiwan, turning them away from China.<sup>8</sup> The March 2005 Anti-Secession Law is only the most recent example of this harsh treatment of Taiwan by Beijing. The resulting resentment has, in turn, encouraged the people of Taiwan to differentiate Taiwan from Mainland China and to see themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese.

#### Identity and Ethnicity

17. (C) Geographically defined Taiwan identity relates directly to "ethnicity," as defined by "provincial origin" (shengji). The mass migration of Chinese from Fujian and Guangdong provinces -- Hoklos (or Fujianese) and Hakkas -- beginning in the seventeenth century overwhelmed the aborigines (yuanzhumin) of Taiwan, who had come to the island several thousand years earlier from Southeast Asia. Generally called "Taiwanese" or "locals" (bendiren), the migrants speak Taiwanese dialect (Taiyu or Minnanhua from southern Fujian) and constitute 84 percent of the island's population. The "Mainlanders" (waishengren) who accompanied the Nationalists and Chiang Kai-Shek to Taiwan in 1949, and their descendants, constitute 14 percent.

18. (C) The DPP rose to power by playing up this identity-ethnicity linkage and emphasizing the difference between Taiwanese and Mainlanders, a distinction that remains central to political discussion today. The linkage between identity and ethnicity, however, is blurring, as more and more Mainlanders, particularly second and third generations, lacking direct Mainland China experience, identify themselves as "Taiwanese" or "Taiwanese-Chinese." With this change, Prof. Hsu argued, ethnocentric identity is in the process of breaking down, making ethnic-based national identity largely a tool for political mobilization. The DPP's Tseng Wen-Sheng stressed that the connection between ethnicity and identity in politics will continue to decline as the younger generation comes into political power. While first-generation Mainlanders may still consider themselves more Chinese than Taiwanese, Tseng said, second-plus generation Mainlanders born and raised on the island increasingly consider themselves Taiwanese. Identity crosses ethnic lines as people, whether Hakka, Hoklo, Mainland Chinese, or Austronesian, increasingly see their destiny tied to the island where they have spent their lives.

#### Importance of Identity in Domestic Politics Declining

19. (C) Politically, the growing Taiwanese identity has benefited the DPP over the KMT. National identity -- Taiwanese vs. Mainlander -- has been the defining difference between DPP and KMT. By 2000, identity had become so important in Taiwan politics, Prof. Hsu argued, that it was largely responsible for the KMT-to-DPP regime change. Four years later, despite the lackluster economic performance of the DPP government, President Chen was reelected with an additional 1.5 million votes. Hsu attributed this to Taiwanese identification that associated with the DPP rather than with the KMT.

10. (C) Identity politics has even entered the KMT, Prof. Hsu explained, with some members urging the party be renamed

"Taiwan KMT" to align with the emerging Taiwanese national identity. Other KMT leaders, however, rejoin that no matter how hard it tries, the KMT will never appear as Taiwanese as the DPP and push a strategy of aligning with China and portraying the KMT as the party that can open communication between China and Taiwan and promote economic ties with China. National Taiwan University's pro-Blue Prof. Philip Yang, however, argued that both parties now have a Taiwanese-centered identity and that the difference between KMT and DPP is no longer Mainland Chinese vs. Taiwanese identity but *status quo* Taiwanese vs. *native* Taiwanese.<sup>8</sup> All of the above analysts expect identity to decline in the future as a factor in domestic politics.

#### *Identity Does Not Equal Independence*

11. (C) Growing Taiwan identity has not translated into growing support for Taiwan independence, however. Rather, there has been a consistent and very high level of support for continuing the cross-Straits *status quo*. A recent Chengchi University poll commissioned by the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) showed 86 percent of respondents support the *status quo* compared to 5 percent for *immediate independence* and 1 percent for *immediate unification*.<sup>8</sup> Even on the question of an ultimate resolution -- eventual unification or eventual independence -- the island is not deeply split. Of the 60 percent who support continuation of the *status quo* in a TVBS poll, 37 percent support *status quo now/decision later* and 23 percent support *status quo indefinitely*, only 14 percent support *status quo now/independence later* and 12 percent support *status quo now/unification later*.<sup>8</sup> DPP Youth Affairs Director Tseng Wen-Sheng told AIT that young people are particularly concerned with the possibility of war because they will be the ones who have to fight it. A March 2005 Chinese Culture University poll of university students found only 35 percent of university students willing to defend the island if the Mainland China attacked, compared to 65 percent who would not be willing to defend Taiwan.

12. (C) Taiwan identity has been effectively decoupled from the question of unification vs. independence. Identifying with Taiwan *is* a different issue from supporting Taiwan independence," Prof. Hsu explained, because the people of Taiwan fully realize that declaring independence would have an exorbitant cost. A recent "Business Weekly" opinion poll found 58 percent of respondents believe a declaration of Taiwan independence probably or definitely would cause war with China compared with 21 percent who believed it probably or definitely would not.

13. (C) Both Hsu and Chen stressed that Taiwan views on cross-Straits relations are directly affected by the U.S. position on Taiwan independence. Since the U.S. has made it clear that it does not support Taiwan independence, many Taiwanese realize that a declaration of independence would probably cause a cross-Straits war without U.S. support that would be catastrophic for Taiwan because 59 percent of Taiwan people believe Taiwan does not have the capability to resist compared to 27 percent who believe it does. The cost-of-war realization is one reason that most of those who consider themselves *only Taiwanese* do not support independence. The DPP's Tseng Wen-Sheng, however, argues that, while Taiwan people increasingly identify with Taiwan over Mainland China, this does not necessarily mean they will never support unification. If Mainland China's political situation changes, he said, it is quite possible that a large number of Taiwanese would support reunification.

Comment: Time Will Tell

14. (C) Taiwan society and politics have been in such a state of flux over the past fifteen years that "time" itself has become a point of controversy in Taiwan. If Taiwan can maintain the *status quo* supported by the overwhelming majority of Taiwan people, the question goes, will time be on the side of Taiwan or on the side of Mainland China? Pro-independence "Greens" fear time will gradually and inevitably pull Taiwan into the PRC economic vortex, gradually ending its separateness. Pro-unification "Blues," on the other hand, see time on Taiwan's side, for time is irrevocably changing and will eventually democratize Mainland China, which will, in turn, completely alter the cross-Straits equation. Either way, Taiwan identity will likely continue growing among the island's population, but this will probably continue to be an identity not tied to the more pragmatic issue of independence.

(Prepared by POL Intern Angela S. Wu.)